with a facing of vertically aligned bird quills dyed red, yellow, and turquoise to create a geometric pattern on a ground of naturally coloured quills. A skin fringe of 112 strands wrapped with natural and red-dyed quills hangs from the belt's lower edge. In the central portion of the fringe, 18 of the strands are each decorated with a Chinese coin held in place by a glass bead. The coins and beads were acquired through trade, yet another measure of success. This belt drew attention to itself and the wearer by being not only colourful but also musical.

KENNETH R. LISTER
Kenneth R. Lister is an assistant curator in the Anthropology Department, Royal Ontario Museum

A pair of beaded slippers and their original wall-pocket storage case, donated to the ROM, represent an interesting combination of Plains Indian and European decorative arts.

Slippers Fit for a Bride

THANKS TO A “NUDGE,” THE ROYAL Ontario Museum received as a gift a pair of Indian slippers in their original wall-pocket storage case from Mary Denoon. The nudge, as she put it, was a recent “Look Again” article in Rotunda about a pair of early 19th-century gold-beaded moccasins. Produced by an Indian craftsman in Canada, this beautiful slipper set is an exceptional example of “fancy work,” a British embroidery style that enjoyed tremendous popularity in England and abroad during the reign of Queen Victoria.

The slippers, with their diminutive curved tongues and right and left cobbled soles with low heels, are patterned after “Albert-cut” bedroom or boudoir slippers, which became popular in Britain about 1860. Mirroring the production process of the Victorian housewife,
weasel-fur ermine. They were of different styles. Some were made with tops, while others were slippers. The Indians brought them to me in big packs of twenty-four or forty-eight pairs lashed together with shaggannappti [hide strips]. I paid from fifty cents a pair for them, according to the quality. Those for which I paid fifty cents, I sold for a dollar and a half, depending on the style and amount of decoration. The Hudson’s Bay bought all my moccasins. Some were sold in this country, and some were shipped to England.

Plains Cree, Plains Ojibway (Saulteux), and Dakota live on the reserves in the Qu’Appelle Valley today. The documentation and the artifacts relating to Nan’s slipper set suggest that it was made at Muskowpetung Agency or at a neighbouring reserve, while the style of beadwork is most characteristic of the Cree or Saulteux. Welsh’s description indicates that the Indians of the Qu’Appelle Valley made an impressive quantity of craftwork in both Victorian and traditional Native styles.

The presence of several simultaneous artistic styles may be understood in light of historical circumstances. In the earlier part of the 19th century many of the descendants of the Qu’Appelle Valley Cree and Saulteux lived in the wooded areas to the east and north of the prairies, where they learned European decorative conventions from missionary women. Just before signing Treaty Four in 1874, they lived in the Cypress Hills and surrounding high plains that now straddle the southwest Saskatchewan-Alberta border, where their woodland and European decorative traditions coalesced with the art forms of the Plains Indian culture. In this context, Nan’s slipper set exemplifies one of several important socio-cultural forces which shaped the artistic creations of the Qu’Appelle Cree and Saulteux.

Arni Brownstone
Arni Brownstone is an assistant curator in the Anthropology Department, Royal Ontario Museum
the Native craftswoman would have made only the upper part of the slippers, while a local shoemaker would have added the soles. The uppers are constructed from deer or moosehide, "home tanned" in the traditional Native way: the hide was kneaded with the mashed brain of the animal and then smoked.

Wall pockets were an extremely popular accessory, tailored to hold such items as watches, letters, matchboxes, and footwear. They were a convenience that enhanced the decor and added a sense of opulence to the Victorian home. Typically, the wall pocket donated to the ROM is made of black velvet. The beaded floral imagery on both slippers and wall pocket is heavily influenced by European prototypes.

Why did a First Nations craftworker make a slipper set in the Victorian style rather than draw on Native traditions to create a pair of moccasins with carrying pouch? Part of the answer lies in the history of the slipper set. It had belonged to Mrs. W. C. Coots (Nan), Mary Denoon's friend until her passing in 1944 and in whose memory the set was donated. Albert Gibbons, Nan's father, was likely the first owner. He lived in Regina as a young man, for many years serving as secretary of The Regina Trading Company. Since the slippers were made for a woman, they were likely commissioned for Amy Gordon, who became Gibbon's wife in 1900.

Given this information, I invited Mary to visit the ROM ethnographic storage room in search of comparable items from the Regina area, which might shed further light on the slipper set. Here we located a shelf skirt bearing beadwork images remarkably similar to those on the wall pocket. The catalogue record noted that, along with a beaded footstool cover, it was obtained about the time of the Northwest Rebellion from Cree of Fort Qu'Appelle.

Mary, who turned 90 in February, remembered that in her youth such shelf skirts, known as valances or lambrequins, were used to hide support brackets for mantels and small shelves holding books or knick-knacks. She recalled that, like the slipper set, such fancy work was commissioned from local Indian craftworkers for the wealthier homes. We found another collection from the same area containing many Victorian-style items including slippers, wall pockets, purses with silk floral embroidery, and napkin holders beaded with conventional Plains Indian geometric designs. This material was collected by J. B. Lash between 1886 and 1897 while he was the agent at Muskowpetung's Agency, which comprised the closest cluster of reserves to Regina, and was only eight or 10 kilometres from Ft. Qu’Appelle.

Norbert Welsh was a one-time buffalo hunter, who operated a trading post from around 1887 to 1904 some 16 kilometres from Fort Qu’Appelle. In his records he stated: "I bought all kinds of moccasins, embroidered in all colors, and trimmed with

Probably the best radio programs you'll ever hear.

You be the judge.

Classical and Jazz
Swing, Folk and Blues
University Credit Courses
BBC World Service News
Arts Coverage
and much more.

Listener Supported
No Commercials

91.1
CJRT-FM

For a Free Program Schedule call Toronto 1-888-595-0404